

STONE HORSE AND PAPAL BULL

INTRODUCTION

In three books (Bahn & Vertut 1988: 19; 1997: 16; Bahn 1998: 3) I have cited a claim made by German prehistoric art specialist Herbert Kühn (1895-1980) in one of his last books (1971: 14) that “Im Jahre 1458 hat der Papst Calixtus III, einer der Borgia-Päpste, aus Valencia stammend, die kultischen Zeremonien in einer Höhle mit Bildern von Pferden verboten” (In 1458 Calixtus III, one of the Borgia popes, from Valencia, forbade cult ceremonies in a cave with pictures of horses). Other specialists have also quoted Kühn’s claim. But strangely, Kühn gave no source whatsoever for this information, despite being a meticulous scholar who usually provided such details.

Initial investigation suggested that the story must be true: Calixtus III was indeed the pope in 1458, he was a Borgia from Valencia (and hence had strong ties with Spain), and—in his short reign of 3 years and 4 months (1455-1458)—did issue thousands of bulls, many of them to combat heresies, which were a particular obsession of his (Sanchís y Sivera 1926; Schüller-Piroli 1979; Navarro 2005).

This tale was of potentially enormous importance for the study of prehistoric art, since the bull would constitute the earliest known evidence for people carrying out ceremonies in a decorated cave; and since the image was a horse, there seemed to be a considerable likelihood that an Ice Age decorated cave was involved. The implications of people in the 15th century AD worshipping in an Ice Age decorated cave were highly intriguing, to say the least, and hence it was important to discover the precise wording of the pope’s letter, and the name and location of the cave. This was the task I set myself in 1997.

FINDING THE SOURCE

Don Alfonso de Borja (1378-1458) was the bishop of Valencia from 1429 to 1458 (Sanchís y Sivera 1926; Schüller-Piroli 1979), continuing in that role even during his short papacy as Calixtus III. He was a prolific sender of letters and bulls: although he was pope for only three years, his correspondence and acts fill 38 fat volumes in the Vatican archives, as well as more volumes in other archives (Sanchís y Sivera 1926: 295-6).

But how to find this one particular bull? The obvious place to start was the great study of Calixtus III’s bulls by Catalan scholar José Rius Serra (1958), but alas he had died before completing his task - the two volumes published cover the years 1455/6 and 1456/7, so the bulls of 1458 remained unpublished. I attempted to find out if he had left an archive, but investigations in Barcelona proved fruitless. The other avenue of research was the late Herbert Kühn himself, but an approach to his surviving family and colleagues led nowhere (F. J. Micha pers. comm. 1999).

Likewise, enquiries to the Vatican led to several scholars in its libraries and universities, but nobody there seemed to have any specialist knowledge of Calixtus III, let alone of his bulls.

KÜHN’S CRUCIAL ERROR

After many years of fruitless search I was at last fortunate enough to be directed to Dr Miguel Navarro, rector of the Colegio del Patriarca in Valencia, an eminent specialist in the life and work of Calixtus III (Navarro 1993, 2005). He was well acquainted with the bull in question, and had even

referred to it in print himself (1993: 297). He showed me an extract of it, which had indeed been published by Rius Serra –because Kühn had made a blunder. The bull dated not from 1458, but from 1455, and so it was included in Rius Serra’s first volume. Since the book was published in 1958, perhaps this led Kühn to confuse the two dates, and his error led me on a wild goosechase for years!

The two volumes published by Rius Serra each contain about 500 pages of dense Latin text, with no index – so, even had I known the correct year of the bull, it would have been a considerable task to find the word “equum”! Here is the text as cited (Rius Serra 1958: 304-305, No. 989):

Dis. fis. gubernatoribus baiulo, iustitie et iuratis civit. Valentinen. ac officiali Valent. etc. Presumentium adolatriam facere etc. Cum in dominio no. viri Raymundi de Villaragut, dom. loci de Olocau Valentin. dio. sit quoddam antrum, la Cova de Maymo vulgariter nuncupatum, ad quod plures utriusque sexus persone, fideles et infideles, quidam videlicet pro sanitate corporis recuperanda, alii vero pro rebus perditis inveniendis personaliter accedunt, et quemdam equum lapidem in dicto antro existentem adorare non tremescunt, Nos vobis mandamus quat. super premissis inquiratis veritatem, et si ita esse, antrum ipsum claudatis.

Dat, 1455. x Kal. sept. a.I. De Curia. JO DE VULTERRIS Reg. vat. 45r, f. 219.

This can be roughly translated as follows (M. Navarro, pers. comm.):

“To the beloved sons, governors, mayors, justices and jurors of the city of Valencia, and to the officials of Valencia etc. Presuming that idolatry is being committed, etc. Since in the domain of the noble gentleman Raymundo (Ramón) of Villargut, lord of Olocau in the diocese of Valencia, there is a cave, popularly known as the Cova de Maymo, to which there come in person many people of both sexes, both the faithful and unbelievers, some of them to recover their bodily health, and others to find lost items, and they are not afraid to worship a horse of stone which there is in this cave, we order you to investigate the truth of this, and if it should prove to be the case, to close this cave.”

23 August 1455 From the Curia. Johannes (Juan) de Vulterris (the pope’s secretary).

Several points emerge from this initial reading. First, of course, we are given the precise name and location of the cave in question, which does indeed exist (see below). Second, it is probable that someone local, perhaps with a grudge, had denounced Raymundo of Villargut to the pope – in those days noblemen had numerous enemies. Finally, we learn that the horse image is made of stone, so it seems most likely that it was a sculpture or a stalagmitic formation, although there

remains a possibility that it was a painting or engraving on stone. Where Ice Age art is concerned, no bas-reliefs have ever been found in the Iberian peninsula, so on balance the most likely would appear to be a natural formation which may have resembled a horse, or whose resemblance had been enhanced in some way, as was so common in that period.

THE ORIGINAL LETTER

Having discovered the exact date of the bull, I was able, with the invaluable help of Miguel Navarro, to find the full text on the relevant CD-Rom of the Vatican archive. Subsequently, and far more exciting, I was able to see and handle the original bull in the Municipal Archives of Valencia (fig. 1).

Examination of the original document immediately revealed that there are two errors of transcription in Rius Serra’s version: the cave’s name is Cova del Maymo, not de Maymo; and the horse is actually described as “equum lapideum” not “lapidem”. Finally, the reference number for the Vatican archive is 454, not 45r, which again would have made it difficult to find the original document.

In addition, it turned out that Rius Serra had not given the full text, merely an extract. There are a couple of other passages –never before published, as far as I know– which are relevant to the enquiry:

In cristiane fidei vilipendium animarum suarum periculum ac malum exemplum et scandalum plurimorum.

Inhibendo districtius quivustris personis cuiuscumque dignitatis...sub corporalibus et pecuniariis...penis ne quisquam de cetero antrum ipsum intrare aut equum predictum manifeste seu tacite vel occulti adorare quoquo modo presumat.

These can be roughly translated as follows (M. Navarro, pers. comm.):

(following the earlier phrase “they are not afraid to worship a horse of stone...”) “thus ridiculing the Christian faith, endangering their souls, and providing a bad example and scandal to many...”

“Severely prohibiting any person of any rank...under the threat of corporal and economic penalties...that nobody as from today should enter this cave nor dare to worship this horse publicly or tacitly or occultly”

Once the cave’s identity had been discovered, it was easy to backtrack and find that, in fact, the tale was well-known in the region. Indeed, only 155 years after the date of the bull, it had been mentioned by the great historian Gaspar Joan Escolano (1611) who stated that very close to Olocau there is a cave called Alimaymon, in whose entrance, at the time of Calixtus III, there was a horse of stone “sin tenerse

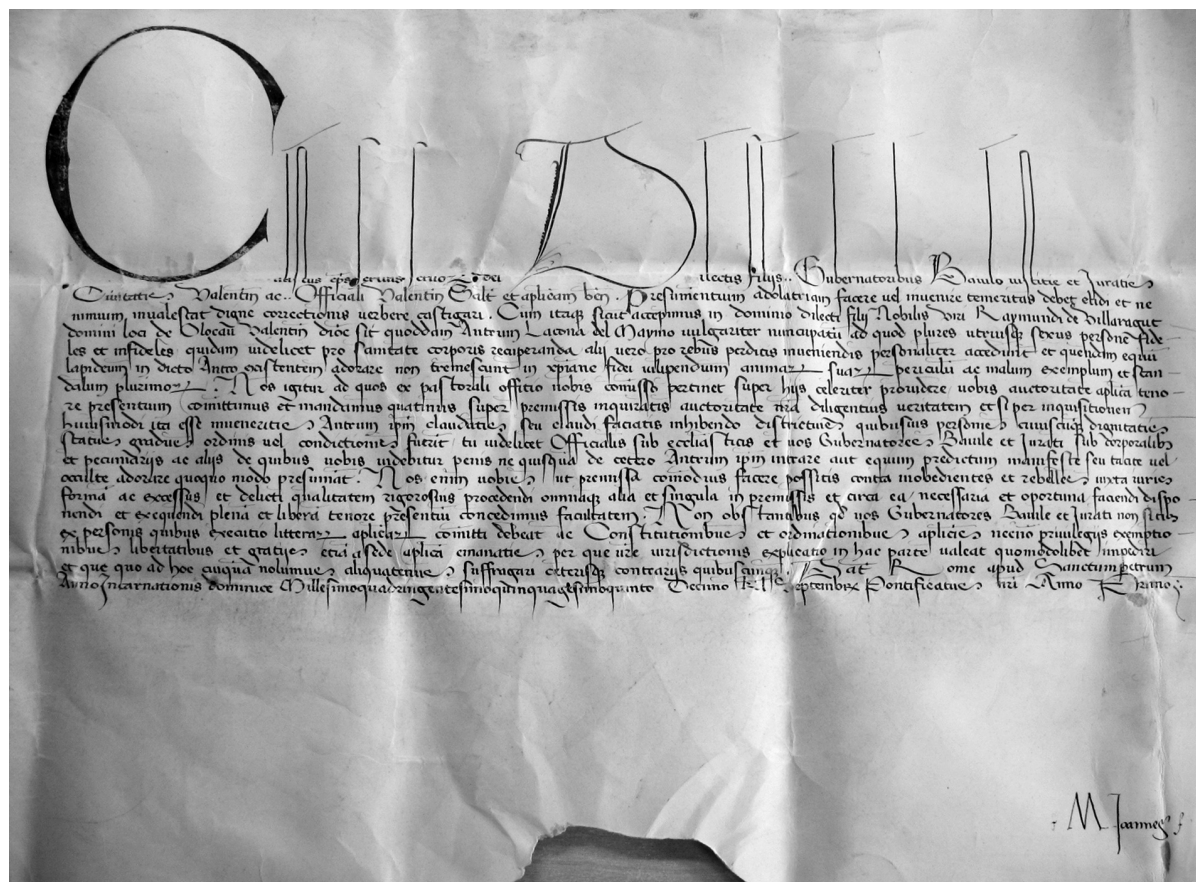


Fig. 1. The original papal bull in the Municipal Archive of Valencia. Note the important words “equum lapideum” in lines 5/6 and the cave’s name in line 4.

sabiduría ninguna de quien le puso, ni porqué” (nobody has any idea as to who put it there or why). He also claimed that people of all nations and beliefs, Christians as well as Moors, used to come in procession to this cave to recover health and things they had lost, and went on their knees to the horse. The aldermen of Valencia began to be suspicious of this superstition, especially as it also appealed to Moors, “the enemies of our faith”, and so they told the holy father about it. In the first year of his Pontificate he issued a bull from Rome to order that the horse should be cut to pieces, and the cave-mouth closed with lime and boulders.

This text leaves one somewhat perplexed. Some of its details clearly come from the papal bull—the stone image, the reasons for the worship—but others are distortions of the pope’s letter. It is perhaps reasonable to see his words “fideles et infideles” as meaning Christians and Moors, although Muslims are forbidden to worship images. However, the parts about the cave’s entrance, going on knees, cutting the

horse to pieces, and closing the cave with lime and boulders do not appear in Calixtus’s text. Did Escolano simply embroider the tale, adding such fanciful details, or did he obtain them locally from the people of Olocau?

Subsequently, many local scholars, especially in the 20th century, followed Escolano by simply repeating this information, doubtless becoming less accurate with each repetition (e.g. there are even claims that the horse figure was of gold or bronze!). So there is a possibility that Kühn had encountered the story not in Rius Serra’s work, but in some book which he had seen or acquired during one of his travels in eastern Spain. That might also explain why he referred to “Bildern von Pferden” in the plural, whereas Rius Serra’s text clearly refers to just one image. But be that as it may, why not cite his source?

The Cova del Maymo, known as Cova Maimona, Cova Alimaimon and –interestingly– Cova del Cavall (cave of the horse), is located 500 m east of the village of Olocau, near Va-

lencia (Long, 3° 09' 45", Lat, 39° 42' 05", altitude 400 m) (Fernández *et al.* 1980: 61). Its mouth, measuring 2 m by 2 m, gives access to a gallery that slopes slightly downward, measuring 40 m by 3 m by 3 m. There are various passages and small chambers leading off it. The total length of the cave is 480 m.

Recently, Josep González carried out investigations in the cave from 1996 to 2001 (see González 2006) to seek material evidence to support Calixtus's and Escolano's claims of ritual worship. It was already well known that numerous remains of pots had been found in the cave. In the middle of the cave's main chamber is a block of considerable size, and it is from a crevice to its left that most pottery has been retrieved. The surface of the block and the ceiling above it are covered with a black deposit, the analysis of which showed that it came from oil lamps, paraffin or other combustible materials. The ceramics collected by González (*ibid.*) dated to medieval times, from the 11th to the 15th centuries, and are interpreted as *ex-votos*, or the recipients for offerings. So the cave does seem to have been used for rituals in medieval times, thus confirming the papal bull to some extent. In this it was in no way unusual—many caves in the region were the scene of ceremonies and worship during medieval times (see Aparicio 1976). This raises the question of why the pope should have bothered to issue an edict about one specific cave in the region, and again it is tempting to see this as the work of someone with a major grudge against the local nobleman.

It is possible that this limestone block originally bore the horse figure, which was destroyed on the pope's orders. It no longer bears any resemblance to an animal. As mentioned above, it seems likely that the "horse of stone" was a wholly or largely natural stalagmitic formation, as are found in many caves. The pope's term "*equum lapideum*", our only piece of evidence, is vague enough to accommodate several different possibilities—engraving, painting, bas-relief, sculpture, or a natural formation that may have been enhanced.

However, one should also bear in mind that it may not have been a horse at all: the identification of animal figures in rock art can be notoriously inaccurate. For example, one Spanish rock shelter with Levantine art, at Tirig (Castellón), is called the *Cova dels Cavalls* ("the cave of the horses"), but the figures it contains are actually deer, aurochs and ibex (Villaverde, pers. comm.).

Even if it was indeed a horse figure, this does not, alas, guarantee that the image dated to the Ice Age. Nothing prehistoric, let alone palaeolithic, has ever been found in or near the cave; and in fact there is a major Iberian site at Olocau (El Puntal dels Llops), of the 5th - 3rd centuries BC, so it is perhaps more likely that if there was an image in the *Cova*

del Cavall, it dated to that period. But the evidence for worship is exclusively medieval. Thus a further possibility (Zilhão, pers. comm.) is that the image was an Iberian sculpture—such figures of horses are a major feature of Iron Age art in this region— which had been taken from an Iberian site and displayed in the cave in medieval times. In view of its destruction, we shall doubtless never know.

CONCLUSION

The most obvious conclusion of this investigation is that we should always be very wary of second- or third-hand information, and try to consult original sources wherever possible. Kühn was usually a meticulous scholar, but his unsourced version of the papal bull was faulty, not least in its date. Even Rius Serra's published summary of the bull in 1958 contained two errors of transcription, and a faulty archival number. The 1611 account of the bull by Escolan was also very unsatisfactory, and numerous local historians in the following centuries merely repeated what he had said. Apparently, nobody bothered to seek out the document in question until Rius Serra—and of course, he was simply concerned with publishing all of Calixtus III's bulls, and had no particular interest in this one: hence his omission of some interesting parts of the text.

The archaeological conclusion which follows from the above observation is that Kühn was perhaps a victim of wishful thinking—it would indeed have been fascinating if a 15th-century pope had denounced ceremonies occurring in front of some Ice Age or later prehistoric cave art. But Kühn's "horse pictures" were actually a single "*equum lapideum*", and it is highly improbable—although just feasible—that it was an Ice Age depiction. So I suggest that it would be prudent to omit reference to this papal bull from future works on Ice Age cave art. It may conceivably have involved prehistoric art, and perhaps even a palaeolithic depiction, but we have absolutely no way of knowing that now, and it is unlikely that further information on this long-vanished horse will ever be forthcoming. To pretend otherwise is simply misleading.

In short, the "stone horse" remains a mystery; but another unsolved mystery is that of why Herbert Kühn, normally so meticulous in giving his sources, gave absolutely no clues—no reference, no note, no personal communication—about where he obtained this snippet of information, despite its potentially huge importance. It seems most likely that he got it from Rius Serra himself, or from his book—and, as we have seen, that may explain his confusion about the date—but I am baffled as to why he did not indicate his source. Had he done so, it would have saved me and others a great deal of trouble!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to dedicate this paper to João Zilhão, who first urged me more than a decade ago to pursue this intriguing claim by Herbert Kühn. I hope he finds it of interest, even though the outcome is not all that one might have hoped for! I began the search in 1997, in the pre-Google age. Had I started it today, it would have been far easier!

In terms of the actual research, the most invaluable help was obtained from Dr Miguel Navarro, rector of the Colegio del Patriarca in Valencia; not only did he solve the problem of the date of the letter, he was also able to read the original Latin script with ease and translate it for me. I am also most grateful to Conchita García who found Dr Navarro; and to Maria Eugenia Santa Coloma, who did a great deal of research for me in Barcelona libraries in 1998 and 2001 – had we known about Kühn's error at that time, her endeavours would have been far shorter and more fruitful! Finally, Karl Schlesier and Franz Josef Micha sent me information about the lack of notes or information to be found among Kühn's family and colleagues; Valentin Villaverde told me of the Levantine Cova dels Cavalls; and Bill Cushwa took a vivid interest, and put me in touch with Cornell University Library, which has the relevant set of Vatican archives on CDs.

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